



DHEC's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling

For Your Information...

Garbage 101

One of the things that every American does every day is throw away garbage. The act is so common that it doesn't even register. We've all heard the cliché: "Out of sight, out of mind." Well, even when garbage is in sight, it seemingly passes under our eyes virtually unnoticed. But it's there. Then it's gone.

How much garbage do we make?

That question is not as simple to answer, as it would seem. Just think of all the different sources - or generators - of garbage. You make garbage, right? And your family makes garbage. And schools, businesses, organizations and industry make garbage. Everybody makes garbage. And everybody makes different kinds of garbage.

While it's hard to determine with precision accuracy how much garbage is being made, it can be measured. In South Carolina, county governments send in an annual report to the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control that includes how much garbage its residents generate and what happens to it - whether it is recycled, disposed in a landfill or sent to an incinerator.

Before reading any further, here's a term you need to know. What you call trash or garbage, professionals call solid waste. So, how much garbage - solid waste - did we make? South Carolinians generated more than 9.3 million tons of solid waste - that is residential, commercial and industrial waste - in fiscal year (FY) 1999.

In the U.S., Americans generated 220 million tons of municipal solid waste (MSW), according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA). MSW, according to the U.S. EPA's method of measurement, includes commercial and residential waste - but not industrial waste. Nationally, each of us made about 4.4 pounds of MSW per person per day in 1998.

Of the 9.3 million tons of solid waste generated in South Carolina in FY 1999, about 3.7 million tons was MSW. Each of us made about 4.5 pounds of MSW per person per day.

Where does the garbage go?

Again, of the 9.3 million tons of solid waste generated in South Carolina in FY 1999, more than 4.1 million tons, or about 45 percent of the total waste stream, was recycled. About 5 million tons, or about 52 percent of the total waste stream, was disposed in landfills while about 163,000 tons, or about 3 percent of the total waste stream, was sent to the state's only incinerator.

In the U.S., about 55 percent of the total MSW is disposed in landfills while 17 percent is sent to an incinerator and the remaining 28 percent recycled.

There are other places garbage may go before being disposed in a landfill, sent to an incinerator or recycled. Some garbage is taken to a **transfer station** where it is compacted and loaded on large trailers. This is done usually when the community is a long distance from a landfill. Some garbage is taken to a **materials recovery facility** where recyclables are sorted from the garbage. The recyclables are taken to companies who process the recyclables where eventually they will be made into new products while the garbage goes to landfill.

How does the garbage get to where it's going?

Usually, it is taken by a garbage truck. But garbage is moved by barge and by rail if necessary and if it that mode of transportation is less expensive.

What's in our garbage?

South Carolina, like most states, measures the total amount of solid waste generated and how it was managed, but not individual categories like food scraps, paper or yard waste. The U.S. EPA does calculate - some would say estimate - exactly what is being thrown away. This work is known as a waste characterization.

According to the U.S. EPA, paper and paperboard products comprise about 38 percent or 84.1 million tons of the total MSW generated nationally in 1998. Yard waste was second, accounting for about 13 percent or 27.7 million tons. Plastic, food scraps and metals round out the top five components of the MSW stream.

To roughly figure out what specific category of product or material is being thrown away in South Carolina, officials use the national percentages determined by the U.S. EPA. There were 3.7 million tons of MSW generated, before recycling, in South Carolina in FY 1999. That means that by using the U.S. EPA's figure of 38 percent of the total MSW generated being paper and paperboard products, South Carolinians generated an estimated 1.4 million tons of paper and paperboard products in its MSW waste stream. Remember, it's only an estimate, but the numbers can be used as a guide.

Think before you throw.

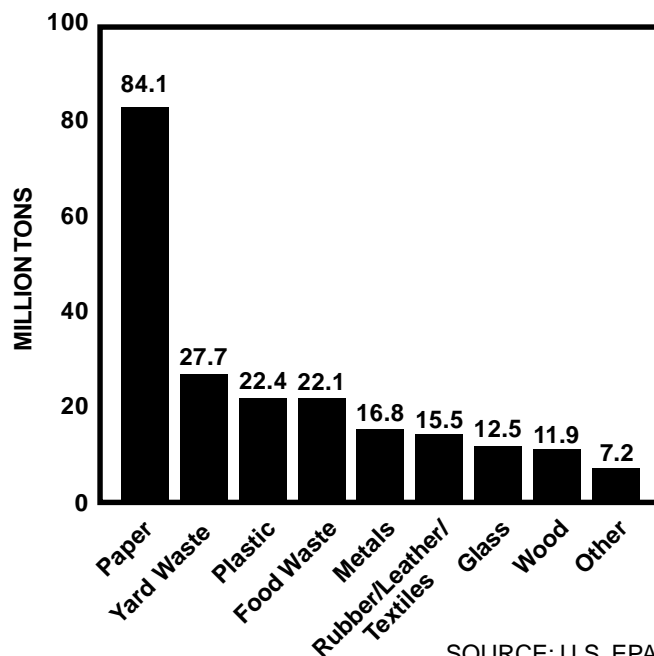
Of all the environmental issues we face, garbage is one we can do something about. The choices we make everyday affect not only the amount but also the type of waste we throw away.

You know the three Rs. Waste reduction, which is making less garbage in the first place, is the most preferred option of waste management. Reduction is followed by reuse, which means repairing items, donating them to a charity or selling them. Reuse is followed by recycling and composting, which is the process of turning materials that otherwise would become a waste into valuable new resources.

Disposing of garbage at a landfill or burning it at an incinerator should be the last option for waste management. To learn more about garbage and ways

1998 U.S. WASTE CHARACTERIZATION

Americans generated 220 million tons of municipal solid waste in 1998. The chart below shows the breakdown by materials and weight of the waste stream.



you can reduce the amount you generate at home, at school, or at work, or more about recycling, composting and buying recycled, visit DHEC's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling Web site at www.scdhec.net/recycle or call 1-800-768-7348.

DID YOU KNOW? You can learn all you want about South Carolina's garbage in the S.C. Solid Waste Management Annual Report published by DHEC. The report includes county-by-county listings of waste generation and recycling activities.



DHEC's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling FYIs provide general information on environmental topics. Readers are encouraged to reproduce this material. For more information about solid waste issues, please call 1-800-768-7348 or visit our Web site at www.scdhec.net/recycle. Please send written correspondence to: DHEC's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling, 2600 Bull Street, Columbia, SC 29201.